



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

2010

Awesome

Hannah Walsh
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/2188>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

AWESOME

Awesome

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Hannah Walsh,
BFA, Indiana University 2007
BA, Indiana University 2007

Director: Kendall Buster
Associate Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2010

CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Using Language to Think about Art.....	1
A Brief Exposition of Titles.....	4
Works Referenced.....	16
Vita.....	20

Abstract

AWESOME

By Hannah Walsh, MFA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Major Director: Kendall Buster, Associate Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Opinions about Linguistics and Phonetics extrapolated to think about art and object-making, followed by an exposition of the titles of recent work, including discussions about: stunting in All Star Cheerleading, rainbows, offset halo patterns, the common corn disease Crazy Top, failure, humility and the profound.

Using Language to Think about Art

A professor of mine once introduced phonetics as the physics of language and went on to explain that when we speak we are actually physically extending ourselves into the world. The etiquette of scientific inquiry keeps linguists from openly acknowledging how startlingly poetic that is, which is why I love linguistics and can't be a linguist.

Phonetics treats language as a *thing*, systematically ignoring meaning in favor of form. In *Thing Theory* Bill Brown writes, "As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects... but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful... A thing in contrast, can hardly function as a window." This is also an apt description of the relationship between language and sound. Phonetics clamps its eyes shut, presses its nose firmly against the window and attempts to describe the glass by touch.

Repeat "thing" over and over until it loses meaning.

That phenomenon is called semantic satiation. It's the fast and loose way to bring the window close to your face. Unlike phonetics though, you keep your eyes open and oscillate between looking *through* and looking *at* with every foggy breath.

If the usual structure of art or language is (for example):

Speaker – Idea – Utterance – Listener

Artist – Idea – Object – Viewer

Then maybe a satiated art or utterance might look like this:

Speaker – Utterance – Listener

Artist – Object – Viewer

This latter structure pulls the artist and viewer, speaker and listener, so close together. It is intimate, more akin to emotion or sex than language. It's powerful and direct and necessarily honest- it's too simple a structure to accommodate irony or deceit.

This is not a new impulse: Abstract painting, Modern Dance, Minimalism... But an ism can't help but function as a window. This satiated structure has a swift momentum because it's efficacy rests on confounding our brain's natural tendency to elide and categorize. It cannot be pinned to a single art historical moment but can be traced through it in it's dogged pursuit of the radical, the novel, the strange, the uncanny...

Phoneticians transcribing languages they're fluent in are continuously distracted by the dual temptation of meaning and a phonetically inaccurate orthography. Similarly, when transcribing new languages, they are often seduced into hearing phonemes common to their native language and being deaf to unfamiliar annunciations. It's a heroic feat of concentration to keep your brain from making assumptions in the face of meaning or familiarity.

I am committed to a satiated art. Art is capable of this type of direct communication, unique in the realm of intentional acts and rarely stumbled upon in any case. A central concern in my work is finding a way to complicate this structure enough to steal it away from the grasp of our interpretive attention, to rescue it from elision while maintaining the integrity of its simplicity.

In language, transitive terms incite a reader or listener to action. "I toss" makes us look for what's being tossed. If a thing is humbled, we look for what has made it so.

“An ~~Object~~ □ is humbled.”

That is my ideal work.

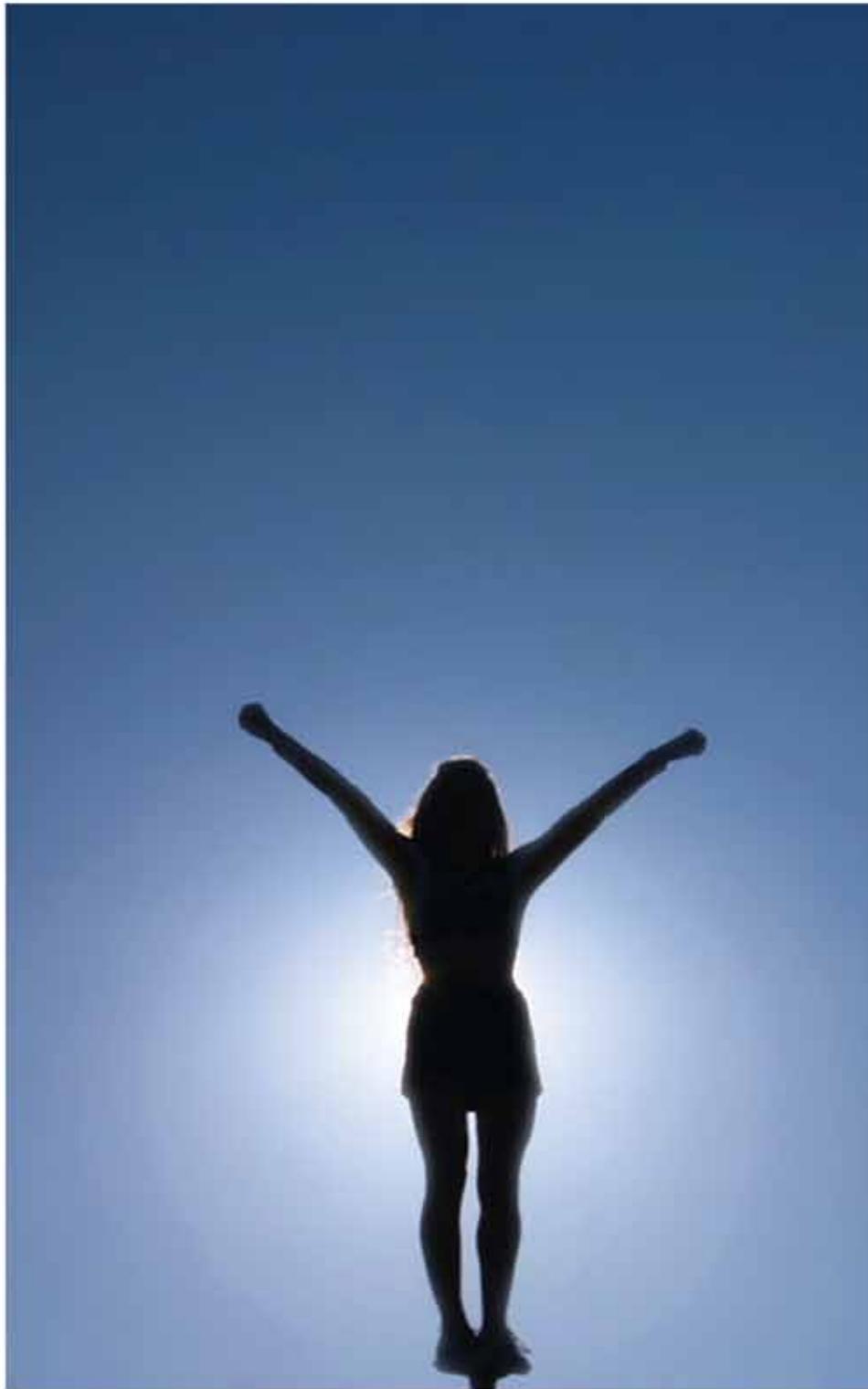
An Awesome is an attempt to render that sentence.

A cheerleader is so commonly objectified, seen as a symbol or a sexual body. But, it's difficult to watch a body delicately balance for a minute and a half without imagining a wobble in your own torso. That bodily empathy recognizes her outside of symbolism or intended “use”, but instead as a *thing*, a body like your own. Blue sky and sun act as the prepositional object of her humility and as a reinforcement of her thingness in contrast to the atmosphere's intangibility and vastness.

A transitive verb saves a thing from a suffocating insularity, it asks a viewer to look through the window. “Humble” in particular can imply the profound, a romantic notion probably best seen in the soft focus of fogged up glass and something that's hopeless to represent directly. Transitivity's invitation to relative understanding is a fitting complement to “thingness”, an adjective often invoked we are stopped short by comparative definitions.

This is the dance I want to inspire, a series of back and forths, swaying hips, coy glances, sometimes satisfying, sometimes unrequited. A satiated, “writerly” work that culminates in more than mere pleasure but in Barthes' orgasmically tinged French term “jouissance”.

A Brief Exposition of Titles



An Awesome
Video
2 min 9 sec loop

An Awesome

The basic coed partner stunt in collegiate and upper-level All Star Cheerleading is called an Awesome. A flyer, the girl who is lifted or tossed, stands in front of her stunt partner, his hands on her waist, her hands on his wrists. On a count she jumps up, pushing off of his wrists as he tosses her up and catches her, one foot in each hand at his shoulders. They adjust, and on a second count he tosses her again, this time catching both feet in *one* hand fully extended over his head, where she balances, 8 feet off the ground on a moving, fleshy, 4 inch platform, arms in a triumphant high V, flashing a big smile.

An almost inaudibly distant cry from the thigh-stands of cheerleading's infancy, the Awesome represents roughly 100 years of development. But this impressive feat is merely the pabulum of current stunting, often serving as the minimum requirement to even attend tryouts.

Advanced stunt couples are now routinely throwing Rewind Heel Stretches, which start like an Awesome except the flyer does a back flip on her way up and somehow lands in her partner's already fully extended (8 feet up in the air!) hand (singular!) with one leg stretched up next to her ear, holding her foot over her head.

Take a second and imagine really doing that.

Now switch perspectives.



Grace... gratis, for free
Video
3 min 34 sec loop

Grace... gratis, for free

Excerpted and elided from this remark by Lawrence Weschler in his biography of Robert Irwin, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*:

“Grace: You work and you work and you work at something that then happens of its own accord. It would not have happened without all that work, but the result cannot be accounted for as the product of the work in the sense that an effect is said to be the product of its causes. There is all that preparation- preparation for receptivity – and then there is something else beyond that, which is gratis, for free.”

Grace is often thought of physically, as in the innate ease with which some bodies move through the world.

But can also be something which comes with age or experience, as in the naturalness of certain basic gestures attained secondhand through the attempt to master certain other more advanced skills.

It is a phenomenon that lies outside the jurisdiction of the will, so it too is necessarily honest.

The sweetness of the peripheral is the hopeful counterpoint to insatiability, or futility, or failure.



Even the Lemon (9 stills)
Super 8 film transferred to video
2 min 12 sec loop

Even the Lemon

Excerpted from a Jean Arp prose poem. The full line reads:

“Even the lemon falls on its knees before the beauty of nature.”

The poem was written in 1926, a moment when Surrealists were employing various absurd and systematic methods to bypass the conscious mind and record something more direct and true, however nonsensical. The poem serves as the introduction to Max Ernst's *L'Histoire Nautrelle*, a series of images produced by his newly invented method for automatic image making, frottage¹, essentially a rubbing. Arp too was attempting to capture something aleatory and uninterpreted through free association.

1. Another erotically tinged French term, frottage has come to be connotated with non-penetrative sex.



Crazy Top (*Slerophthora Macospora*). September 25, 2010 Arcadia, IN
Digital print
10.5" x 16"

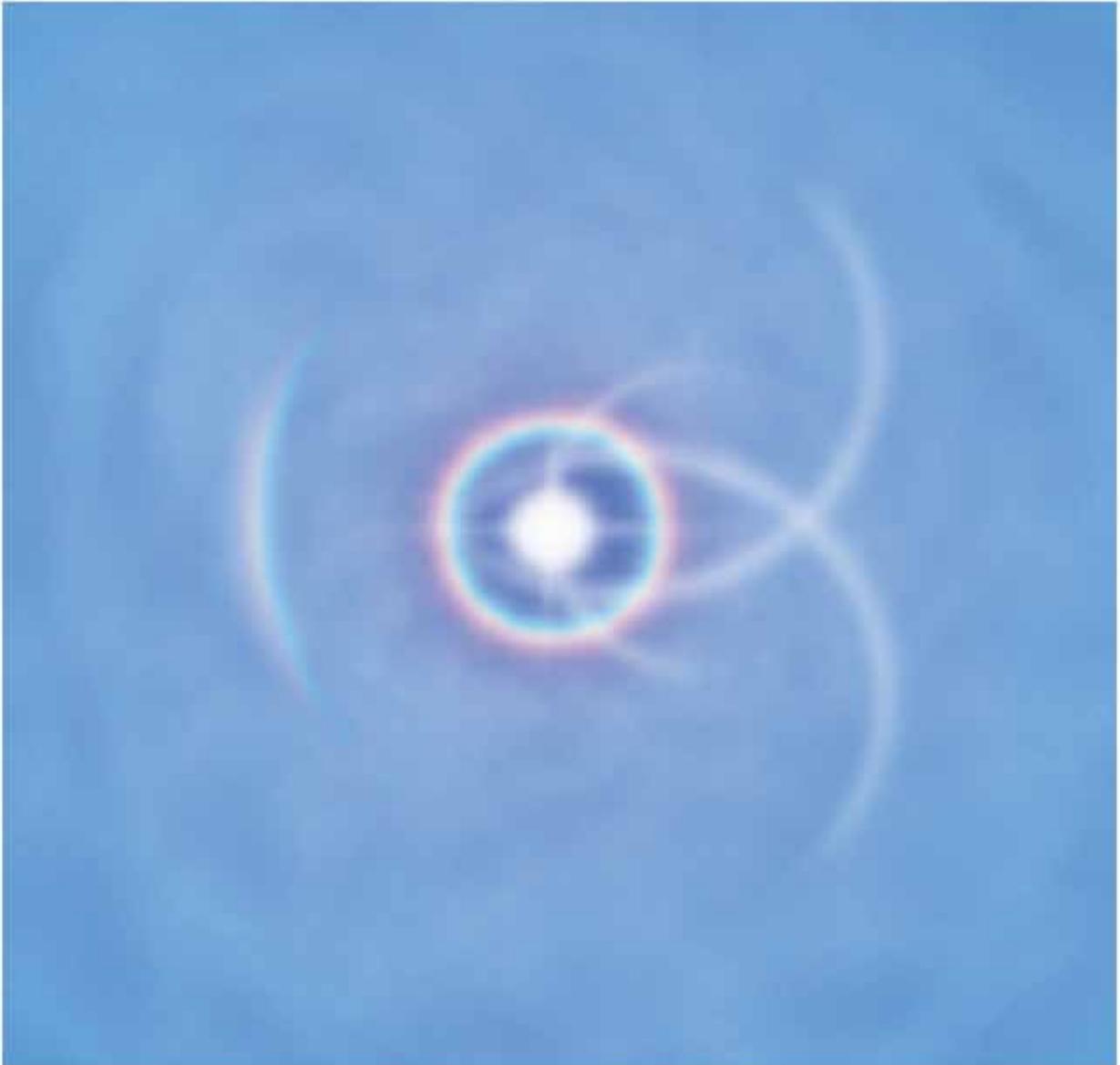
Crazy Top (Slerophthora Macospora). September 25, 2010 Arcadia, IN

“Crazy Top” is the common name for the corn disease *Slerophthora Macospora*. It is caused by a fungal infection in seeds that are submerged underwater for a prolonged period before germination. Most often occurring after a wet planting season, the disease manifests in small pockets within a field corresponding to the shape of the earlier puddles and so is rarely widespread enough to threaten an entire crop. Instead of a tassel, affected plants are crowned with a baroque eruption of leaves, some long and expansive, and many curled together and in on themselves in a way resembling flowers. This impressive plume weights the top of the plant beyond the strength of the stalk, bending the plant over in apparent fatigue, or shame, or coquettishness. These stalks produce no ears or tassels.

Related definitions:

Pathetic Fallacy: the literary device of portraying inanimate nature as having human feelings and character.

Animism: the belief that nature is sentient



Offset Halo Pattern. May 26, 1865. Crawfordsville, IN
Digital print
16" x 15.5"

Offset Halo Pattern. May 26, 1865. Crawfordsville, IN

An offset halo pattern is a series of prismatic shapes that form around the sun or moon caused by an abundance of certain shapes of ice crystals in the atmosphere. An anonymous party recorded this occurrence in a written description and black and white sketch. This particular pattern is anomalous- specific to this time and place.

Circumzenithal arcs (see fig. 1) are another phenomenon caused by atmospheric ice. They are sometimes called “smiling rainbows”, which would of course imply that all other rainbows are frowning.

Though relatively common, they are rarely seen because they occur almost directly overhead and people don't often have occasion to look up.



fig. 1

Works Referenced

- Arp, Jean. Introduction. *L'Hisotoire Naturelle*. By Max Ernst. Paris, 1926.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. Print.
- Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory. " *Things*. Spec. issue of *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1-22. Print.
- Corliss, William R, ed. *Rare Halos, Mirages, Anomalous Rainbows and Related Electromagnetic Phenomena: A Catalog of Geophysical Anomalies*. Glen Arm, MD: The Sourcebook Project, 1984. Print.
- Mbz1. "Circumzenithal Arc and Sundog over Cirrus Clouds". Photograph. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. 11 March 2010.
- Thomison, Peter and Allen Geyer. *Troubleshooting Abnormal Corn Ears and Related Disorders*. C.O.R.N. Newsletter by the Agronomic Crops Team and Ohio State U, Aug. 2008. Web. 2 Feb. 2010.
- Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1983. Print.
- Weschler, Lawrence. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: a life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982. Print.

Vita

Hannah Walsh was born on August 24, 1984 in Mishawaka, Indiana and was raised an hour and a half or so south of there near Arcadia. She attended Hamilton Heights there from kindergarten until she graduated in 2002. She went on to study at Indiana University in Bloomington and concurrently earned a Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture in 2007. Hannah earned her Master of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010.